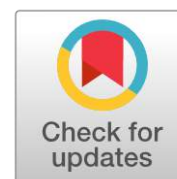


ACADEMIC ESP COURSES IN A HYBRID MODE: ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

Developing academic ESP courses in a hybrid mode has come to the forefront of the educational agenda due to social and economic reasons: technological advance followed by the emergence of new communication, business and education technologies; new generations of learners who grow up in virtual reality rather than in real life; commercialisation of education; changes in workplaces and business organisations; a pandemic that resulted in increased use of the electronic and hybrid modes of interacting and working. In light of these circumstances, the research on the key actors in the educational process – learners and teachers – has gained importance and has become the reason to initiate a study of these actors' attitudes and perceptions with regard to the academic ESP courses in a hybrid mode. The article presents and discusses the results from a survey conducted within this study and related to the preparation of reference criteria for course design in terms of parameters. Data analysis has implications for the educational sector in terms of language and subject course development, as well as of the introduction of relevant policies in higher education.

Keywords: hybrid mode, academic ESP courses, ESP, ESP courses, hybrid ESP courses

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Research background

For a number of reasons, education has been rapidly changing over the last decades and has thus made teaching and learning much different compared to previous times: technological advance, developments in psychology and linguistics, societal and environmental changes. Modern technologies led to new ways of interaction and everyday communication. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic made modern civilisation face a new reality and embrace new modes and methods of communication, work and study. E-learning, online learning or remote learning was introduced as a form ensuring the education in remote areas, but quickly turned into a popular form for consultation, tuition and business communication because of its convenience. Within some thirty years, mankind started using the Internet as a way to reach friends and relatives, build social and professional networks, do business. Video conferencing, meeting and negotiating became a more reasonable option compared to business trips and face-to-face contacts. The changes in the landscape of communication and interaction resulted in new professional and educational environments. Since some activities cannot be performed in a mediated way, the electronic mode was followed by the emergence of a hybrid one combining the traditional, face-to-face, mode and the electronic one. The pandemic accelerated these processes and made educational institutions reconsider their policies and use the two new modes widely. Against this backdrop, research was conducted to study the online and hybrid practices of higher education institutions, as well as to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of students and lecturers. This will facilitate the development of hybrid ESP courses at the author's university in line with its mission and policy for internationalisation, inclusion and high-quality education.

According to Grimes and Whitmyer (2009), e-education is a pedagogical methodology and is "the application of Internet technology to the delivery of learning experiences" (Grimes & Whitmyer, 2009, p. 1). Abed (2019) gives a more detailed definition:

[...]the provision of educational content (electronic) through the media based on the computer and its networks to the recipient in such a way that allows the possibility of active interaction with this content and features and with its peers only simultaneous or not synchronized and the possibility of completing this learning in time and place and at the speed that suits conditions and abilities, as

well as the possibility of managing this learning also through these media. (Abed, 2019, p. 1).

Kumar and Kush (2006) explain the rapid spread of the e-mode in teaching and learning with commercialisation in education. This view is supported by Lee and Duncan-Howell (2007) who note the cost-effectiveness of online courses. Among the advantages of e-education, Ishlaiwa (2006) mentions learners' easy access to the teacher, the transfer of knowledge and educational experience through forums and channels, the possibility to model education based on the intense use of various media.

Realising the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional and hybrid modes, educational experts came up with the idea of blending them so as to benefit from their advantages and minimise their disadvantages with the aim of ensuring access to and attracting more learners. In this respect, Stanley (2013) points that educational technologies add value to language teaching, save teachers time and efforts, allow learners to direct their learning, be more creative and go beyond the traditional learning process. Alberts et al. (2017) note the synergistic effect of blending the face-to-face and e-modes and thus having a wider range of teaching methodologies to implement in the course of instruction. Snart supports their view by defining the hybrid mode as "a fusion without loss" (Snart, 2010, p. 57) and considering the new mode a flexible alteration of the traditional one in terms of its pillars – fixed time, location and learning pace. This is the reason why Dziuban et al. see it as the "new normal" or "new traditional model" (Dziuban et al., 2018, p. 1). Singh et al. highlight the possibility for "improvement in students' time management skills, critical thinking skills and comprehension skills" (Singh et al., 2021, p. 144). In addition, Watson (2008) emphasises the learner-centred teaching and the wider range of options for integrated summative and formative assessment and interaction. Meskill et al. (2020) point to the following strengths of hybrid courses: enhanced authentic and multimodal opportunities, effective learner interaction that is not possible in traditional classes, optimised feedback and instruction.

Hybrid academic ESP courses

Bulgarian HEIs had to switch to the electronic mode of teaching during the pandemic, but at the end of this period, when the situation improved, a hybrid mode

combining face-to-face and online educational processes was introduced. This proved to be a successful decision because it provided the personal contact students and lecturers had been missing, as well as a more objective and fair way of assessment and feedback along with the opportunity to attend academic classes from places other than university premises and in some cases in remote places or health-care institutions. What is more, the hybrid mode could be introduced as a part of modern higher education that allows students who work and study or are of humble background to graduate and have better career prospects and accomplish their personal development. In addition, it could enable universities to expand cooperation, invite foreign guest lecturers for virtual exchanges or provide local faculty with the opportunity to teach and do research, participate in educational and scientific events or in mobility programmes.

The emergency use of e- and hybrid modes during the pandemic revealed the advantages and disadvantages of these modes compared to the traditional one and convinced educational experts in developing hybrid courses that contribute to university portfolios and add value to the overall quality of the education offered. During this period, lecturers had no time to develop syllabi, materials and activities tailored to the specifics of the electronic and hybrid modes, which was a drawback in terms of teaching and learning effectiveness. Therefore, by setting up banks of learning and assessment materials and developing syllabi designed for the hybrid mode, students and faculty could participate in the learning process with improved performance, a feeling of empowerment and self-direction, and greater engagement. Access to studying would be increased and course relevance with relation to real-life environment and situations in the workplace would be enhanced.

The researchers who have been investigating the specifics of the hybrid mode in education have attempted to outline the key features of hybrid instruction. Thus Alberts et al. (2010) suggested a set of methodological principles to follow when designing hybrid courses: learning should be based on expected outcomes in terms of course content and a range of cognitive skills; learning programmes should require student active involvement; students should be encouraged to communicate and collaborate with the teacher and peers; teaching should create a learner-centred environment; it should accommodate different learning styles; it should provide timely and constructive feedback on learning; it should support learners to become autonomous; and should

encourage and provide opportunities for student reflection on learning (Alberts et al., 2010, pp. 189-195).

Introducing hybrid ESP courses with interactive content, banks of materials that equip students with additional options to practise and improve their functional communicative competence could increase student interest in learning along with the control of the pace of learning and the type and difficulty of the materials they choose from. Involving students in a learning process that takes into account the specific features of the new generations that are accustomed to live more in the virtual reality rather than in real life with face-to-face communication would be more attractive and, therefore, more stimulating for them in terms of ESP acquisition. However, whether this assumption is right, could be established by surveying students' and lecturers' attitudes and perceptions.

Method

Research on students' and faculty's attitudes and perceptions

Taking into account societal and scientific developments discussed so far and their reflection on education, a team of four experts with extensive previous experience in ESP and in particular: the acquisition of specialised vocabulary - Gatev (2023), needs analysis – Stefanova (2021), e-portfolio-based assessment – Todorova-Ruskova (2023) set out to conduct research on this issue. Along with the observations about the pandemic period of education and its implications for the future of teaching and learning, academic competition and cooperation locally and globally is taken into consideration, as well as factors stimulating the implementation of new teaching methodologies and educational technologies.

Research tasks include a study of students' and lecturers' attitudes and perceptions with regard to the hybrid academic ESP courses in the field of economics and socio-political studies; the preparation of reference criteria for the development of a flexible hybrid educational model; the setting up of resource banks for hybrid learning comprising authentic learning and exam materials, including interactive ones, as well as of educational platforms, websites and software tools, interactive applications designed for foreign language learning in groups or individually. Hence the literature survey and the survey of students and lecturers will provide the basis for the development of the

reference criteria or guidelines to be used in the design of the hybrid academic ESP courses for students of economics, socio-political studies and law at University of National and World Economy (UNWE). The effectiveness of such courses and banks can, in turn, encourage the introduction of hybrid courses for all university subjects.

Tools

Students' and faculty's attitudes and perceptions are investigated by a structured online survey based on the method of the first respondent and was carried out at UNWE. The survey includes twenty-one questions, most of them multiple-choice ones or based on a five-point Likert scale. There is one open-ended question giving respondents the opportunity to leave a comment about hybrid ESP courses and there are two questions aimed at gathering personal information. For the students, the required information includes year of study and programme and for the faculty – years of experience and subject taught (English, subject or both).

Participants

Responses were collected from 34 lecturers and 240 students. Most of the lecturers are highly experienced: 29% with experience of over 25 years, 29% - 16-25 years, 39% - 6-15 years and only 3% - 1-5 years. As for their expertise, 68% teach subject, 21 % - English and 11% teach both subject and English. The student sample groups included respondents from seventeen specialties/programmes. They are mostly freshmen – 48% and sophomores – 40%. The third-year students account for 8% and the fourth-year ones – for 5%. from seventeen specialties/programmes.

Results

The results from the other survey questions are presented in Tables 1 and 2 (see Appendix) except for the open-ended one. Selected comments from students and faculty are given below the tables. The selection was made to highlight the variety of perceptions.

Both respondent groups share the same positive attitude to hybrid academic ESP courses in terms of modern education, flexibility and the opportunity to work and study (Q 1-3). As for learner motivation, it can be inferred that even though more than a half

of the sample see the hybrid mode as more motivating, the fraction of the respondents who are uncertain and have no opinion is big – a quarter of the students and a third of the lecturers. A similar reaction can be observed with regard to learner achievements – over 50% of the students are convinced in the beneficial role of hybrid courses, while only 41% of the faculty share this opinion. The number of hesitant respondents in both groups is 32% of the faculty and 28% of the students. Therefore, in order to ensure the optimised development of hybrid ESP courses, it should be established what the reasons are for this attitude and how it could be changed – course parameters, materials design, activities. Question 9 is aimed at finding information related to student willingness for active involvement in the course by participating in content creation. Most of the respondents (62-63%) agree or strongly agree that there is willingness for participation. However, the number of those who are uncertain is high again. Hence, it is worth investigating what this view is related to – a view that the learner should be an obedient participant in the learning process with no right to suggest and modify; a fear of making suggestions because of the assumption that the peers and teacher would not be enthusiastic and positive, or a perception that it is the teacher who is expected to be creative and responsible for course-related issues. Questions 13, 15, 16 and 17 are indicative of students and faculty's perception that the hybrid courses are more appropriate for the new generations of learners, as well as that the creation and exchange of materials banks tailored to the hybrid mode would contribute to the enhanced learner motivation and course effectiveness. Question 18 is based on the assumption that the academic workplace should resemble the future workplace of the student because this way the learning environment is the same as the occupational one, which underlines the relation between the material taught and its application in the future and, at the same time, ensures authenticity. Special attention is needed with regard to the number of hesitant respondents. Once again there is a 21% (students) - 26% (faculty) of the people surveyed who are not definite about the benefits of the environment. This could result in lower motivation and engagement for work, which is why a careful consideration is required before course development begins in order to ensure optimised course design and learning outcomes.

The data presented in Table 2 allows to compare the attitudes to the different modes and draw conclusions in terms of ratio, assessment, teacher-student contact,

feedback, student involvement, mode advantages and disadvantages. It becomes obvious that faculty find traditional face-to-face teaching more beneficial with regard to contact and involvement, while students see the hybrid and the traditional modes as equally beneficial. As far as assessment is concerned, some impressive 76% of faculty favour the traditional mode, whereas students find the hybrid mode a little more effective – 47% of this respondent group compared to 40% perceiving the traditional one as the best option. In terms of weaknesses, the three indicated ones are of the same significance to the respondent students, while the most important disadvantage for lecturers is objective assessment. When it comes to acquisition effectiveness, the respondent lecturers assign a little greater significance to the traditional mode (50%), with almost half of the students preferring the hybrid one (48%). On the other hand, both groups favour the hybrid mode regarding the applicability of the acquired functional communicative competence in their future careers, which is to be taken into account when defining the ratio and activities as a part of a hybrid ESP course syllabus.

As mentioned above, the only open-ended question in the survey was aimed at gathering respondents' comments so as to add to the rest of data by giving a more personal feedback and thus allowing to get deeper insights into the students' and lecturers' perceptions and attitudes. The selected comments highlight facets of the hybrid ESP courses and their place within programme curricula: the face-to-face – online ratio, the importance of technology and the new means of communication at work and at university, the teacher – students contact, assessment:

Faculty

“The future of education”, “They must be introduced in HEIs in order to provide higher quality education and strengthen performance”, “To be effective enough, the academic ESP courses must be combined with a digital system for tracking the achievements and results of the students”, “To have hybrid courses, but within a hybrid course there is more traditional teaching, not online”, “They could be used as a last resort”, “The ratio between traditional and online classes is important”.

“Traditional courses provide direct contact between teacher and student, allow the teacher to monitor students' body language and understanding, and adapt the learning material to their reactions. This is almost impossible in hybrid and online learning. I believe that the traditional form of academic courses gives the best results, but of course, if it is supplemented with multimedia, case studies,

discussions, business games, searching for information on the Internet during the classes, etc.”

“The hybrid academic courses are very suitable for students as most of them are working. Moreover, the hybrid environment is the "new normal" so the academia should not be excluded from this trend.”

“I believe hybrid language courses can be as effective and efficient as traditional (in-class) courses, if teachers use appropriate instructional design techniques, in particular appropriate learning activities and assessment methods.”

Students

“In my opinion the traditional ESP courses are more effective”, “I find ESP courses a little bit more convenient than only the traditional or online ones but they also have their cons”, “Hybrid education should be enforcement only in force major cases”, “For me personally it is very useful and meaningful, definitely not a waste of time”, “They could become attractive if they are strongly supported by additional resources”, “It's pointless. Traditional courses are the most effective”, “It's fine as long we have at least 50% in person classes”, “I think it's motivating and really nice for those who want to be prepared for future job with also hybrid tape of working process!”

“When it comes to assessment on personal knowledge, it is better face-to-face examination. In terms of new material teaching, it is up to the teacher to present the information not only in the traditional way, but also using interactive online learning materials (Google, games, research, etc.)”

“Gives students flexibility, because student years are not only for going to university. It is about finding yourself as a growing person and experiencing opportunities. The best time to try is whatever we want is now. And schedule flexibility would allow us the students to do so.”

“The effect of hybrid ESP courses won't be noticeable unless you have hybrid academic courses for all subjects.”

“Online and hybrid courses are definitely the future. Speaking from experience, during the covid lockdown years, when our university was 100% online, was the time I was most productive in my studies, projects and academic refinement.”

“Hybrid studying should be available for all lectures. We live in 2023 and people must decide if they want to attend the lecture in person or via technology.”

“It's very personal and different for every person. I think it's good to have this kind of education but make exceptions, if someone is more comfortable with the traditional way, most of his studies will be traditional and the same thing if someone is comfortable with the online version.”

“ESP courses are flexible and allow for more proper time management of the students. Video recording of lectures/sessions gives an opportunity to go back and review lecture material.”

“They are one of the most efficient ways for learning professional English and they provide us with the opportunity for gathering banks of multimedia and preparing for the lifepath we strive for.”

Discussion

The comments are presented in the form they were received in the survey. Based on all of them, it is possible to see that there are similarities in the views of students and faculty, though students are more willing to have hybrid courses. Along with the answers to the rest of the questions in the survey, the comments provide more personal information and facilitate the preparation of reference criteria and guidelines for the development of hybrid academic ESP courses catering for the needs of the learners on the one hand and motivating faculty to contribute to their introduction, on the other. For instance, it becomes evident that assessment materials can be part of digital banks with faculty and students contributing, using and exchanging, but assessment should be carried out in the traditional mode. Furthermore, because of the respondents’ belief that the direct contact between lecturer and students is better than the mediated one that mobile devices provide, when considering the ratio component, language experts should give priority to the traditional mode in a proportion that facilitates acquisition in a flexible and engaging way.

Conclusion

The research on students’ and faculty’s attitudes and perceptions with regard to hybrid academic ESP courses is a daunting task for a number of reasons: generation gaps; individual differences in terms of background, experience, approach to teaching and learning, motivation, interest in applying novelties, personal beliefs. Although data analysis has not finished yet and reference criteria are still being considered, the main directions of the development of hybrid ESP courses have been outlined. Elaborating on them would contribute to the maximised effect of introducing innovative language courses and could provide the basis for the development of hybrid courses for all academic subjects as mentioned in a respondent’s comment. Discussions with educational stakeholders could add value to the course development by considering

more details and views. For the Bulgarian academic landscape, surveys like the one presented in the article are scarce, which highlights the need to set up a tradition in this direction, thus allowing more voices to be heard. What is more, this is one more opportunity to reveal the potential and benefits of civil society and mutual efforts. In a knowledge-based economy, education is of crucial importance for sustainability and progress.

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Appendix

Table 1.

Likert scale questions

Questions	Students	Faculty
1.Hybrid academic ESP courses are part of modern education	31%- strongly agree; 53% - agree; 13 % - neither agree, nor disagree; 3% - disagree; 1%- strongly disagree	44% - strongly agree; 50% - agree; 6% - disagree
2.Hybrid academic ESP courses provide for greater flexibility	38%- strongly agree; 50% - agree; 8 % - neither agree, nor disagree; 3% - disagree; 2%- strongly disagree	56 % - strongly agree; 38% - agree; 6% - neither agree, nor disagree
3.Hybrid academic ESP courses enable students to work and study	37%- strongly agree; 42% - agree; 12 % - neither agree, nor disagree; 6% - disagree; 3%- strongly disagree	12%- strongly agree; 71% - agree; 12 % - neither agree, nor disagree; 3% - disagree; 3%- strongly disagree
4.Hybrid academic ESP courses increase learner motivation compared to traditional and online courses	21%- strongly agree; 40% - agree; 25 % - neither agree, nor disagree; 9% - disagree; 5%- strongly disagree	12% -- strongly agree; 41% - agree; 32% - neither agree, nor disagree; 9% - disagree; 6%- strongly disagree
5.Hybrid academic ESP courses enhance learner achievements compared to the traditional and online ones	8%- strongly agree; 46% - agree; 28% - neither agree, nor disagree; 8% - disagree; 10% - strongly disagree	9% - strongly agree; 32% - agree; 32%neither agree, nor disagree; 21% - disagree; 6%- strongly disagree
9.Students are interested in creating content for their ESP course (giving ideas, suggesting topics/activities, etc.)	14%- strongly agree; 49% - agree; 29 % - neither agree, nor disagree; 6% - disagree; 2%- strongly disagree	18% - strongly agree; 44% - agree; 23%- neither agree, nor disagree; 9% - disagree; 6%- strongly disagree
13. Hybrid academic ESP courses are more appropriate for modern learners' style of learning and communicating	27%- strongly agree; 50% - agree; 14% - neither agree, nor disagree; 6% - disagree; 3%- strongly disagree	24% - strongly agree; 44% - agree; 21%- neither agree, nor disagree; 6% - disagree; 6%- strongly disagree
15.ESP learning is more effective and modern if students have access to banks of multimedia resources and materials for hybrid training	35%- strongly agree; 46% - agree; 14 % - neither agree, nor disagree; 3% - disagree; 2%- strongly	32% - strongly agree; 53% - agree; 12%- neither agree, nor disagree; 3% - disagree

	disagree	
16.Do you think that the creation and exchange of banks of multimedia resources and materials for hybrid training lead to enhanced learner motivation?	25%- strongly agree; 49% - agree; 19 % - neither agree, nor disagree; 5% - disagree; 2%- strongly disagree	18% - strongly agree; 62% - agree; 14%- neither agree, nor disagree; 6% - disagree
17.Do you think that the creation and exchange of banks of multimedia resources and materials for hybrid training lead to enhanced course effectiveness	25% - strongly agree; 50% - agree; 19% - neither agree, nor disagree; 5% - disagree; 1% - strongly disagree	24% - strongly agree; 56% - agree; 14%- neither agree, nor disagree; 3% - disagree; 3% - strongly disagree
18.Hybrid ESP courses prepare students for their work in the future by creating an environment similar to their professional environment after their graduation	27% - strongly agree; 45% - agree; 21% - neither agree, nor disagree; 4% - disagree; 3% - strongly disagree	21% - strongly agree; 44% - agree; 26%- - neither agree, nor disagree; 6% - disagree; 3% - strongly disagree

Table 2.*Multiple choice questions*

Questions	Students	Faculty
6.In your opinion, which are more beneficial and effective for students' future career	59%- hybrid; 25%- traditional; 16% - online	65%- hybrid; 32%- traditional; 3% - online
7.Hybrid academic ESP courses cannot ensure:	33% - objective assessment; 34%- detailed feedback about progress; 31% - discussions with the teacher about performance; other*	43% - objective assessment; 26%- detailed feedback about progress; 31% -discussions with the teacher about performance
8.Which mode provides for the contact with the teacher that you need	45%- hybrid; 45%- traditional; 10% - online	38%- hybrid; 59%- traditional; 3% - online
10.Students are more involved in the learning process if the course is:	43%- hybrid; 44%- traditional; 13% - online	44%- hybrid; 53%- traditional; 3% - online
11.Which mode of assessment is the most effective one:	47%- hybrid; 40%- traditional; 13% - online	21%- hybrid; 76%- traditional; 3% - online
12.Which mode is more effective in terms of student skills and knowledge of specialised English	48%- hybrid; 39%- traditional; 13% - online	47%- hybrid; 50%- traditional; 3% - online
14.The academic ESP courses that equip me with the specialised knowledge and skills I need for my future career are:	54%- hybrid; 32%- traditional; 14% - online	65%-hybrid; 32%- traditional; 3%- online

Note: * Other indicated more options as more than one answer is possible: a&c; a, b&c; b&c; a&b